

Eyes wide open at the Hunters Point Shipyard

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by Ahimsa Porter Sumchai, MD



The Hunters Point Shipyard became a major Navy base during World War II. Later, during the Cold War, ships intentionally irradiated by the nuclear bomb tests in the South Pacific were brought here to be cleaned of their radiation. Though those efforts were futile, they spread radioactive debris throughout the Shipyard, much of it yet to be cleaned.

"If the broad light of day could be let in upon men's actions, it would purify them as the sun disinfects." – Supreme Court Associate Justice Louis Brandeis, 1916-1939

Justice Louis D. Brandeis was an American lawyer and Supreme Court Justice who championed transparency in media and government in the early 20th century. In a 1913 Harper's Weekly article titled "What Publicity Can Do," Brandeis authored the famous maxim, "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants." Twenty years earlier Brandeis wrote in "The Duty of Publicity" about "The wickedness of people shielding wrongdoers and passing them off as honest men."

Brandeis's legacy has filtered like the rays of the sun down upon local governments like San Francisco where, in 1999, the San Francisco Sunshine Ordinance was enacted with clearly stated findings and purpose:

"The Board of Supervisors and the People of the City and County of San Francisco find and declare: (a) Government's duty is to serve the public, reaching its decisions in full view of the public. (b) Elected officials, commissions, boards, councils and other agencies of the City and County exist to conduct the people's business. The people do not concede to these entities the right to decide what the people should know about the operations of local government."

The Hunters Point Shipyard remediation and development has spawned an environmental justice "engine" that drives media and government transparency. The SF Bay View newspaper remains the source of disinfecting sunlight and the science of community protection.

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A Declaration of Policy was adopted by 86.4 percent of San Francisco voters on Nov. 7, 2000, calling for the City and County to urge the Navy to follow the highest standards for cleaning up hazardous materials and toxic contamination at the Hunters Point Shipyard. Proposition P was adopted as a declaration of city policy interpreted as a non-binding expression of community sentiment.

The City Charter states the Board of Supervisors has the duty to enact ordinances into enforceable law and at no time in history has there been a more pressing mandate to advance the principles enshrined by Proposition P.

The raging debate clearly before us is the mandate to establish current and acceptable cleanup standards protective of human health and environment at a federal Superfund site. Newly elected District 10 Supervisor Shamann Walton is organizing public hearings to address the differences in cleanup standards proposed by the U.S. Navy, Environmental Protection Agency and experts like myself and Daniel Hirsch, retired director of the Program on Environmental and Nuclear Policy at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

In presentations to the Hunters Point Shipyard Citizens Advisory Committee on Jan. 28, 2019, both Hirsch and I agreed the Parcel A1 gamma scanning conducted by the California Department of Public Health fell short of standards protective of human health.

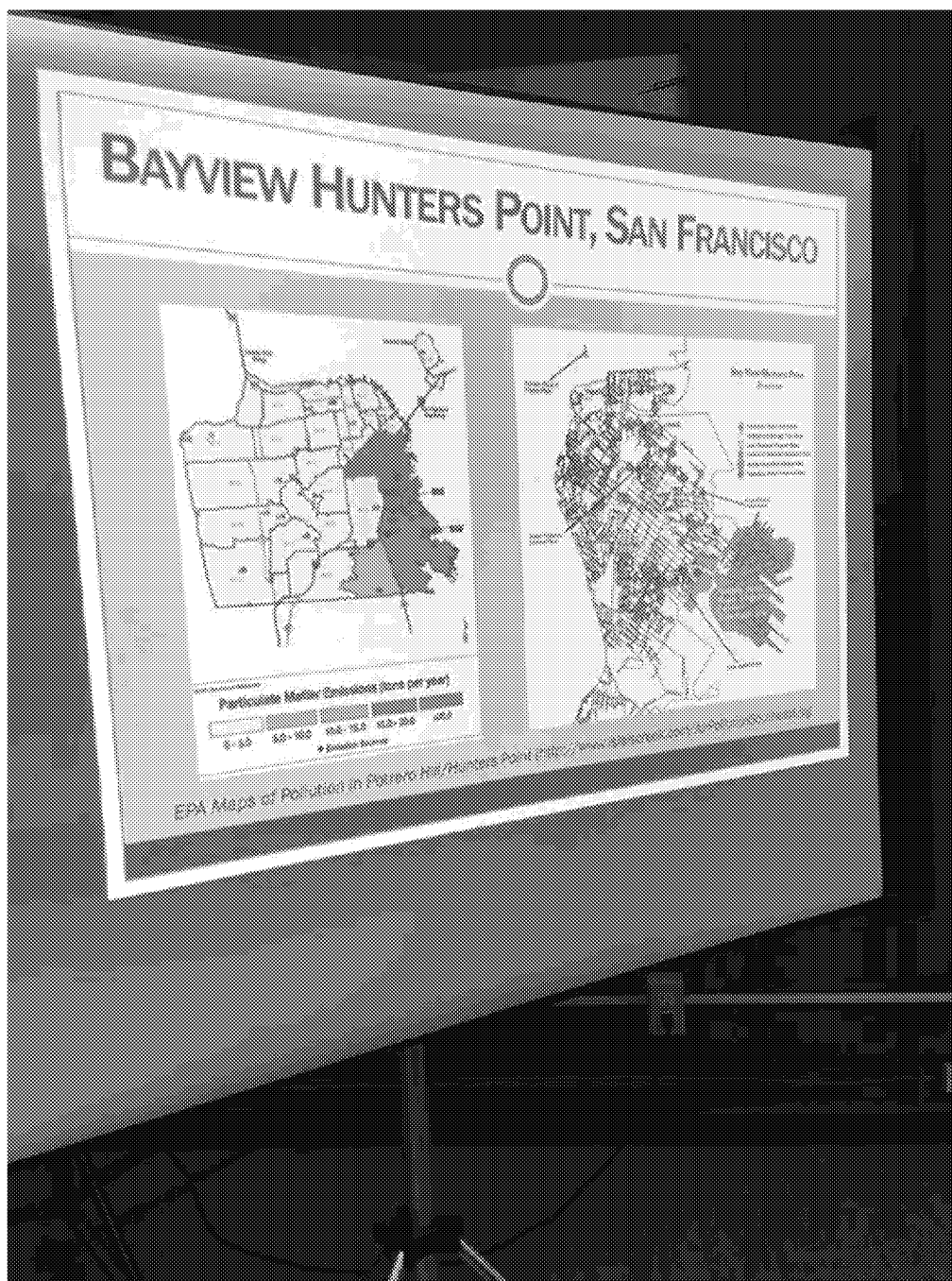
Disparities in disease expression and health outcomes documented among Bayview Hunters Point residents point directly to environmental exposures to particle pollution and toxic air contaminants. Indeed, many of the leading disparities in cardiopulmonary disease can be directly attributed to particle pollution, including preventable emergency department visits for pediatric and adult asthma, chronic sinusitis, and premature death due to heart attacks, irregular heartbeat, congestive heart failure, hypertension, premature births and fibrotic lung disease.

According to Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, BVHP has more asthma than any other part of the city, eight times more than residents of the Sunset and two times more than residents of nearby Potrero Hill and Mission Bay.

Bayview Hunters Point is also the neighborhood plagued by the greatest concentrations of particle pollution due to construction and development at the Hunters Point Shipyard and Candlestick Point, diesel emissions from Highways 101 and 280 and trucks and vehicles as well as cement and metal processing industries.

According to the EPA Office of Air and Radiation, asthma, heart attacks, hypertension and irregular heartbeats are triggered within minutes of exposure to major triggers called particle pollution that enter the pulmonary and circulatory systems via outdoor and indoor air.

Tomas Aragon, MD, is the health officer of the City and County of San Francisco and director of the Population Health Division of the San Francisco Department of Public Health. According to his profile on the prestigious social media physician network Doximity, Dr. Aragon's stated mission is to "exercise leadership and legal authority to protect and promote health and direct public health services." Dr. Aragon acknowledged in a July 2018 meeting his awareness that particle pollution plays a major role in health disparities in the 94124 zip code.



Particulate emissions are highlighted in red on this graph and are predominantly concentrated in Bayview Hunters Point.

As BVHP has become increasingly more gentrified, it is no longer possible to assign differences in health outcomes documented by DPH community surveys to race or socioeconomic status in a "blame the victim" approach applied to low income minority communities.

California's Assembly Bill 617 forged "a new frontier in air quality management" when signed into law by then Gov. Brown in 2017. AB 617 established funding for community air monitoring work in heavily impacted neighborhoods. Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice was awarded a grant to set up a network of 10 particulate air monitors in BVHP in a two-and-a-half-year project.

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The first steps are to establish a Community Advisory Group and Steering Committee of local organizations and residents to identify locations for the air monitors. Leading the effort, along with Greenaction, are representatives of BVHP Community Advocates, Literacy for Environmental Justice, BVHP Mothers and Fathers Committee for Health and Justice and Bayview Hill Neighborhood Association.

The SF Bay View newspaper will be following and reporting on this monumental effort that will memorialize the legacy of environmental justice and community protection in Bayview Hunters Point for future generations. The BVHP Environmental Justice Community Air Monitoring Project Steering Committee is seeking to fill limited openings and offers a \$100 stipend for attending monthly meetings. Additionally, the project is seeking to recruit an air monitor technician charged with maintenance and surveillance of the air monitoring network.

If you are interested and would like to participate, please contact the BVHP Community Air Monitoring Project Steering Committee facilitator Dalila Adofo at dalila@greenaction.org or call 415-447-3904.

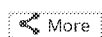
The transition from environmental justice advocacy to community exposure research in Bayview Hunters Point gained momentum in January 2019 through implementation of the Hunters Point Community Biomonitoring Program. The biomonitoring program currently evaluates residents living in the 94124 zip code within a one mile radius of the Hunters Point Shipyard using a urinary test that detects 35 toxic elements commonly seen in industrialized neighborhoods.

The organizers of the Biomonitoring Program have been invited by Health Program Specialist Duyen Kauffman to present to the Biomonitoring Section of the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment in March of 2019.

SF Bay View Health and Environmental Science Editor Ahimsa Porter Sumchai, M.D., founding chair of the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard Restoration Advisory Board's Radiological Subcommittee and contributor to the 2005 Draft Historical Radiological Assessment, can be reached at asumchai@gmail.com. Dr. Sumchai is also president and medical director of Golden State MD Health & Wellness, an author and a UCSF and Stanford trained researcher.

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